

United States Department of Agriculture  
Bureau of Agricultural Economics  
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THE GENERAL FIELD OF FARM POPULATION

(Prepared by Raymond C. Smith, Assistant Chief, Farm Population, for the  
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Fundamentally the BAE's function, like that of the Department of which it is a part, is to contribute to the improvement of agriculture and the welfare of farm people, and to do this in such a way as to further the general welfare. It makes this contribution by collecting many kinds of data, analyzing them in a variety of ways, and making statistics and the results of research available to farm people, to the public and private agencies and organizations that serve them, to business men who buy their products and sell goods and services to them, to the representatives the people elect to Congress, and to the general public. In carrying on its program it cooperates with many other agencies, both Federal and State, and is beginning to cooperate more with international agencies as well.

The bureau's task is not a simple one. Most of the agricultural and rural life problems with which it deals have many facets; they are not only complex, but difficult to deal with. To carry out a well balanced and comprehensive statistical and research program requires a versatile staff and one large enough to call for some division of labor and of responsibility if the work is to be done efficiently. In an attempt to solve this problem the work of the bureau has been divided up among fourteen divisions and these have been grouped into four general fields. This in turn has created other problems. While there are discernible cores of interest and competence in all of the divisions, the fact that many of the more important problems on which we collect statistics and do analytical research do not fall neatly into any one division, but often cut across the interests and skills of several divisions and even of the general fields, poses a serious problem.

How can we assure that a problem on which research is to be done is viewed as a whole and how can we balance properly the research efforts devoted to it to the end that important phases are not neglected? This requires a high degree of intelligence in arranging for the collection of the proper data by appropriate methods and in planning and carrying out all of the analytical studies needed, with proper attention to interrelationships of various factors within agriculture and rural life and to interrelationships between these factors and the factors outside of agriculture. It also requires a high degree of cooperation between the workers in the various general fields and divisions.

If we are fully conscious that a high degree of cooperation is essential, and if all of us so condition ourselves as to be anxious to cooperate at all times, the Bureau can make real progress "in providing,"



to quote a member of the BAE staff, "the understanding necessary to the solution and prevention of social and economic problems, to the optimum utilization and conservation of our human and natural resources, to the making of our farm people a healthier, better functioning, and more enlightened citizenry of the country and of the world, and to the maintenance of peace."

I have attempted briefly to describe the setting in which I view the general field of work that is designated broadly as "Farm Population." In the first place it is a part of a larger program. In the second place I am convinced that workers in this field can accomplish relatively little if their efforts are not closely integrated and synchronized with the efforts of the workers in the other general fields in the Bureau. Moreover, I believe that this general field is not at all unique in this respect. It is my intention, and I am confident that it is also the intention of the division heads in this general field, constantly to strive to integrate the parts of the Bureau's research program that are assigned to the divisions in this field with the parts that fall within other general fields and divisions.

The general field "farm population" has to do primarily with farm people. In a broad sense so do all of the other fields in the Bureau. The distinction between the fields is largely one of how farm problems are approached. In this field the principal concern is largely with human problems in agriculture, with rural life, and with the welfare of farm families wherever they live, whether their incomes are high or low, and whether they are owner-operators, tenants, sharecroppers, or hired workers. Work in this field must be closely integrated with the rest of the work of the Bureau since, to quote another member of the BAE staff, "a knowledge of the social, psychological and cultural components of agricultural and rural life situations is essential to the understanding of all agricultural and rural life problems."

An increasingly large proportion of the work is being done in cooperation with other divisions in the Bureau, with other agencies in the Department and with the Land Grant Colleges. While some of the research in this general field will be on more or less local problems in cooperation with Land Grant Colleges, particularly where the results of such studies will be useful in connection with regional or national analyses, most of the work will be regional or national in scope.

The work is organized in two Divisions, the Division of Farm Population and Rural Welfare and the Division of Special Surveys. The work carried on in each of these divisions will now be described briefly. Since the report on the Bureau's proposed program is now available, and since it outlines proposed work in some detail, I will merely indicate the work to be attempted.

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Work in the Division of Farm Population and Rural Welfare

The principal problems or situations to be studied in this division are farm population, farm labor, rural organization patterns and processes, and levels and standards of living.

In the farm population phase of the division's program estimates are made of farm population, of its composition by age and sex, of births and deaths, and of migration to and from farms. Expansion of work in this field contemplates research to improve definitions and procedures and toward breakdown of as many of the data as possible by States, as well as more analyses of the data obtained. The State Statisticians have carried on a very important part of this work for many years through collection of most of the data used. The work has involved close cooperation with the Bureau of the Census as well as with Agricultural Estimates. This is also true for most of the other work of the division, and particularly for the work in farm labor.

The farm labor work has to do largely with the farm work force. In this respect it is complementary to the work in the Division of Farm Management and Costs on labor demand in which particular attention is given to labor requirements and the productivity of farm workers. Studies of the size, composition, distribution, and changes in the farm work force have been made over a period of years, and more recently special attention has been given to farm wages and wage rates. It is expected that in the future relatively more attention will be given to analytical work, and that studies of the income, duration of employment, and occupational and living conditions of farm workers will be expanded.

A knowledge of how farm people organize themselves for various purposes and of the processes involved in their participation in group affairs is essential to gaining their cooperation and to the success of nearly all programs and activities, public or private, designed to serve them. The division will continue studies of rural organization patterns and techniques in order to obtain information which will be of help to farm people themselves and to those who serve them. Much of this work will be done on a county basis in cooperation with Land Grant Colleges and with agencies of the Department.

In the levels and standards of living work the division will depend heavily upon Agricultural Estimates for data, particularly upon their enumerative surveys, and will cooperate closely with the Division of Agricultural Finance, the Division of Statistical and Historical Research, and the Bureau



of Human Nutrition and Home Economics as well as with Land Grant Colleges. Measuring existing levels of living and finding the major factors responsible for their variation will be emphasized. Special attention will be given to studies of rural housing and rural health, two of the major components in the farmers level of living. Also farm and non-farm levels of living will be compared.

#### Work in the Division of Special Surveys

The work of this division will include special surveys, and analyses, or assistance in making analyses, of consumers' preferences for agricultural products, and of the underlying factors that influence farmers' production, marketing, or purchasing intentions and behavior; and also will include the gathering of data that will help increase the effectiveness of agricultural activities or improve service to farmers.

There appears to be a need at the present time for a consumers' preference study with respect to products made of cotton and of competing fibers. The division, in cooperation with other divisions, particularly the Division of Marketing and Transportation Research and the Division of Statistical and Historical Research, with the Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics, and with the Cotton Branch of the Production and Marketing Administration, is planning experimental work for such a cotton preference study at the present time. After trial schedules have been tested in the field and pilot studies made, a larger study will probably be made later this year if the results of the experimental work are promising. It is expected that the work on consumers' preferences will be expanded to include many other farm products in the future. Since the demand for farm products will be influenced by how well they meet consumers' wants and desires, the results of such studies should help farmers to obtain a maximum market for the things that they sell. Studies will also probably be made in cooperation with several divisions, of the farmers' own preferences for the goods and services that they buy.

The factors and influences that underly farmers' intentions and behavior with regard to production and marketing will be studied, particularly in cooperation with the Division of Statistical and Historical Research. One small experimental study with respect to farmers' hog production and marketing practices is already underway. It is expected that greater attention devoted to motivation studies will contribute to the making of more accurate estimates and predictions with regard to probable production and marketing.



Surveys, in cooperation with the agencies involved, to find out how effectively various programs are reaching farmers and securing their cooperation will be continued. Quite a number of these surveys have been made for agencies outside of the Department as well as for Department agencies. The results of a recently completed survey are being used by the Farm Security Administration to increase the effectiveness with which its County Supervisors function in carrying out the Farm Ownership Program. Another survey which is now underway in cooperation with the Extension Service was designed to appraise the effectiveness of Extension work in the State of Vermont. In all of these studies of agency operations data will be obtained which will help administrators increase the effectiveness with which the objectives of programs are realized.

Much of the work of the two divisions that I have described is related, and I have attempted to point out how it also relates to other work in the bureau. The statisticians in Agricultural Estimates, both in Washington and in the State offices, have a very important part to play in collecting the statistics which are analyzed by the researchers in this general field of the bureau's program. By their advice and counsel, and particularly because of their close contact with thousands of farmers, they can help the research program in more ways than merely collecting data. We solicit their interest in and assistance with our part of the bureau's research program in any ways that they feel they can contribute. I hope that the researchers will reciprocate fully and cooperate with the statisticians in every possible way.

